

# TEACHERS' CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES IN EXECUTING NEW POLICY INITIATIVES: IMPLICATIONS FOR REFINING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION TOWARDS ACHIEVING WORLD-CLASS EDUCATION

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**Abstract** :The aim of this study was to identify the challenges that teachers faced in implementing new educational policies. Data were collected through interviews with selected teachers in two secondary schools in Malaysia. In total 24 participants were involved in this study. Data analysis was carried out through analytic categories based on hermeneutics philosophy. The findings indicated that teachers face various challenges during the implementation of the national education policy that derived from The attitudes and abilities of students, School work environment, Parents placing excessive demands on teachers, Challenges arising from the Ministry of Education and The actions of the Senior Management Teams in imposing additional duties on teachers. The data from this study could assist policy makers in shaping the implementation of a new policy in ways that put less pressure for teachers in order to enhance positive implications from the policy implementation that can lead to achievement of world-class education.

**Keywords** : teachers' challenging, refining policy implementation, policy initiatives

## BACKGROUND

Between 1996 and 2010 the Ministry of Education in Malaysia implemented the Smart School Concept, the implementation of teaching and learning Mathematics and Science in English and the publication of the National Blueprint 2006-2010 to ensure that the education system in Malaysia was able to fulfill current national and international demands. The Ministry argued that the policies being implemented had many potential benefits for students as individuals as well as for society as a whole. However, changes in education also create new challenges for teachers because, while concentrating on teaching and learning, they are also required to focus on implementing the new policies. According to Hashim (1999, p. 48), 'changing times require that schools become learning enterprises for teachers and students. Today's teachers have to meet demands from various quarters as more concern is shown towards higher standards and improved performance for all students'. As a centralized education system (Kandasamy & Blaton, 2004), policies are made at the national level. All these policies are then implemented at various levels of education, culminating in the classroom. These, therefore, present shifting challenges for teachers particularly during the transition from one policy to another. The question is, what are the challenges that teachers faced in implementing new educational policies? This is important issue that needs to be clarified in order to

assist teachers to implement a new policy smoothly whilst do not put them in stress situations.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to find the answers about a phenomenon in the context of the challenges that teachers faced as a result of the implementation of new educational policies, this study aimed to draw on the data sources of experience of the challenges by the teachers. These accounts could only be obtained within a secondary school setting because the implementation of these educational policy changes only involved secondary schools. In order to get a detailed understanding of this phenomenon, this study needed to be conducted in its natural context. These research purposes and focus are in line with the purpose and characteristics of a case study. In this study, the research questions aim to gather explanations from teachers about their perceptions of the challenges that they faced as a result of the implementation of educational policy changes. A case study is conducted to shed light on a particular phenomenon (M. D. Gall, et al., 2007) and thus it involves review and collection of a substantial amount of data about the specific case selected to represent the phenomenon (Denscombe, 2007; M. D. Gall, et al., 2007). According to Gall, Gall and Borg (1999, p. 296), researchers often conduct interviews of field participants in a case study. In this study, interviews served as the primary data collection method.

### The criteria in selecting research sites

Three criteria were used in selecting research sites. These were involvement of the schools in current educational policy changes in Malaysia, school location and the willingness of participants to be involved in the study. As the research is focused on the implementation of current educational policy changes in Malaysia, this study was restricted to only National Secondary Schools and did not involve Government-Assisted Religious Secondary Schools, Private Secondary Schools and all Primary Schools, because all these schools were not involved in the three educational policy changes. One school in an urban area and one school in a rural area were selected for this study because, firstly, as described by Economic Planning Unit (2006), there are differences in living standards among the population in urban and rural areas. This occurs because of limited employment opportunities in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. In addition the issue of poverty also involves the indigenous people of Malaysia, who live mainly in rural areas and are among the poorest and least educated and this is a significant challenge for teachers. The Malaysian government faces the difficulty of integrating and assimilating them within mainstream society and also providing them with equal opportunities in education (Ministry of Education, 2004). Secondly, teachers in rural areas more than those in urban areas, are faced with problems such as schools lacking appropriate infrastructure and teaching facilities (Ministry of Education, 2006b). Thirdly, many teachers in rural schools lack appropriate levels of expertise and have had inadequate teacher training (Ministry of Education, 2001). The Ministry is having serious problems in providing experienced teachers, especially female teachers, for school placement at schools in rural areas. In trying to solve this problem, the



Ministry is taking the step of transferring experienced teachers to schools in rural areas, although generally teachers are reluctant to transfer, particularly females. This situation affects the quality of teaching and learning in rural schools. If teachers are unwilling to be transferred to schools in rural areas but are forced to comply, they are unlikely to be enthusiastic about their profession. These negative feelings are likely to translate onto the students (NUTP, 2005). The above discussion summarizes differences between rural and urban locations in Malaysia. These differences between rural and urban locations led me to select one school from an urban area and one school from a rural area to enable me to identify any differences or similarities in challenges teachers were facing during educational policy changes in two those very different settings. The willingness of teachers to participate was crucial for the researcher to embark on the study. If I were to select a school in which the participants were not willing to give their support and commitment over extended period of time, it would severely limit the quality of the data to be collected. Therefore, the willingness of participants to participate was important in selecting research sites. Teachers were used as a principal source of information in addressing the research question. Because of the large numbers of teachers in the selected schools, it was not feasible to conduct interviews with of them. Instead, a sample that reflected an appropriate cross-section of gender, years of experience and different subject specializations in order to provide diverse perspectives was selected. The purpose of interviewing teachers was to find out their views about the challenges they faced as a result of the implementation of educational policy changes.

### **Participating Schools**

Two schools were identified which met the research criteria outlined previously. Hereafter, these schools are referred to as Aman Secondary School and Bersatu Secondary School respectively. Both names are pseudonyms. Aman Secondary School was located in an urban locality surrounded by an affluent neighbourhood. The teaching staff numbered 73 of whom 33 were aged under 40 years while the rest were aged over 40 years. A considerable majority of the teachers were Malay with a small number of Chinese and a very small number of Indian descents (School record, March 2009). The student population was 782 students, 510 male and 272 female, with 579 Malay, 148 Chinese, 52 Indian and 3 others. The majority of parents had higher and middle socio-economic backgrounds and were mostly professionals, businessmen and government officers. There were also a small number of students who came from lower income groups whose parents were factory workers and farmers. Bersatu Secondary School was located in a remote rural area. The teaching staff numbered 93 of whom 48 were aged under 40 years while the rest were over 40 years with the majority of them being Malay and the others Chinese, Siamese and Indian (School record, March 2009). The majority of parents had lower socio-economic backgrounds and were mostly farmers and rubber tappers. The aboriginal parents did not have any permanent jobs. They survived by hunting in the jungle and receive welfare payments from the Malaysian Government. There were also a small number of students who came from middle income groups whose parents were mostly teachers and staff for that school and

schools in the surrounding area. The school's student population was 1395, 703 male and 692 female with 1383 Malay, and 12 Aboriginal.

### **Negotiating research access and entering the field**

This section focuses upon the outline of the processes that were used in order to get participant involvement in the study. In the process of negotiating and entering the field, I contacted the school to request a meeting with the Principal to fully inform him about the study and to begin building a trusting relationship. At the meeting he was presented with all the documents related to the study including the letter requesting access, the information sheet, the letter of agreement to provide access to the school, the consent form and was given a brief overview and time frame for conducting the research. He promptly agreed to give permission to contact teachers. To select teachers in the school, I sought permission from the Principal to obtain from the teacher responsible for school data, a list of all teachers and their ages, gender, years of experience, ethnicity and subject specialisations. From the lists I identified teachers who met the criteria and they were invited to participate and given all the documents concerning the study, including the information sheet and the consent form. Briefly in Aman School, the gender breakdown of the teachers included 4 males and 8 females. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 30 years. The participant teachers had different and diverse subject specialisations which were 3 each in Language, Technical and Vocational, Humanities, 2 in Science and 1 in Mathematics. At Bersatu School, the gender of the participant teachers was 4 male and 8 female. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 30 years. The participant teachers had diverse subject specialisations which were 3 each in Language, Humanities and Technical and Vocational, 2 in Mathematics and 1 in Science. The members of the PTA were all male. Their experience as members of the PTA ranged from 1 to 5 years.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

In the analysis of interviews with all participants in the study, I referred to the participants' point of view and tried to represent their views as they saw it and reported they experienced it. Close attention was paid to emerging themes and patterns. The first step taken in identifying themes from the interview transcripts was to keep the research questions in mind while reading the transcripts. Viewing each piece of data, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence and identifying which of the questions that particular paragraph or sentence(s) addressed. Draft the writing up of the findings in relation to preliminary identification of themes from the data from both schools commenced at that point. Subsequently, in order to ensure that no significant information contained in the interview transcripts was overlooked, I reconsidered at length the data from each transcript that had not been included in the previous script. The content of this draft followed hunches, ideas and thoughts expressing some of the concepts, pictures and insights which emerged as the analysis was worked through. Having satisfied a degree of confidence with the analysis and believing that I had made optimum use of the information from the interview transcripts, the new findings and the previous notations were combined to form themes applicable to the study. During this process, attempts were made to



weave information, insights and thoughts to see whether common themes would emerge leading towards a broader picture which might have a significant impact on the study. The final products from this analysis were I identified and listed several analytical themes that were answering the research questions.

## **DISCUSSION FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The issue to be investigated from findings related to teachers is the demands they inevitably face. The challenges involve the attitudes and abilities of the students, the working environment of the school, excessive dependence of parents on teachers, challenges arising from the Ministry of Education and SMTs' actions in requiring additional duties to be performed and supporting teachers in their work.

### **The attitudes and abilities of students**

The main challenge teachers encountered when they wanted to implement the national educational policies, particularly in teaching of Science and Mathematics in English, was the lack of interest from students. This issue has a significant effect on teachers in implementing such a policy, because according to Davies et al. (2009) students have higher motivation when studying subjects compatible with their interests and ambitions. In this study, students who did not have interest in their subjects had poor motivation levels. According to Rahman et al. (2010, p. 1265) "students who have high achievement motivation will be more successful compared to those with lower achievement motivation". Based on this finding it would be an onerous task for teachers to implement the national education policy for the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English. Furthermore, the results also indicate that teachers had concerns in the implementation of teaching and the learning of Science and Mathematics in English because of students' poor proficiency in English and generally low academic abilities. Several studies in Malaysia regarding the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics in English have also found similar results (Rahman, et al., 2010; Sulaiman, Hassan, & Baki, 2009; M. F. B. Yahaya, et al., 2009). The researchers did not provide any reasons why low academic ability interfered with the implementation of a policy. The issue remains, if students do have poor ability in some subjects, why is this not being addressed prior to the implementation of a new policy for teaching and learning? What are the reasons that have led to the inability of these students which has in turn created burdens for teachers? Is it the management of the school or the weakness of students a contributing factor? The answer to these questions have not been explored sufficiently in previous studies related to the implementation of this policy.

### **School work environment**

At both schools, teachers stated that responsibilities other than teaching caused some difficulty for them in executing policies relating to teaching such as teaching Science and Mathematics in English. This result is in line with a study conducted by Moriarty et al. (2001) with teachers in England and Wales. They affirmed that the single most frequently cited factor claimed by teachers as stressful was the excessive demand for paperwork. Several previous studies have noted also that



teachers in Malaysia have been entrusted with numerous responsibilities (Malakolunthu, 1994; Segumpan & Bahari, 2006). The Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, who is also Minister of Education, announced at a press conference on March 31, 2010 the establishment of a special committee to review the workload of teachers in Malaysia (Utusan Malaysia, 31 March 2010). However, from February 3 to 11, 2011 in the same newspaper's "Forum Section" a teacher reported that there was no progress relating to the establishment of the committee. He expressed the opinion that, to date, there are no solutions to the problems that have arisen and instead it has resulted in more work for teachers (Utusan Malaysia, 3 February 2011). Subsequent to this issue being raised, further discussions in the "Forum Section" of the newspaper about the workload of teachers took place over a number of days, demonstrating that for this issue, at this point in time, there is no satisfactory solution. (Utusan Malaysia, Forum Section, 10, 11, 12 February 2011). Teachers at both schools believed that they suffered from an education system that put too much emphasis on examination achievement. This finding is consistent with the views given by (Ong, 2010, p. 99) who stated that, "in Malaysia pressure on teachers to produce high test performance results in much teaching to the test and the adoption of teaching methods designed to prepare students for the test so as to achieve high test performance". Similarly, the opinion of some researchers in the USA noted that "teachers complained about the excessive emphasis placed on test outcomes" (Shaver, et al., 2007, p. 733). Teachers found that the examination results for their students were being compared with the results of students in other schools despite differences in student ability and the facilities existing in the school. According to Ong (2010, p. 99) "results from the national examinations have been the sole yardstick of assessing student's achievement for many years". However the Ministry of Education acknowledged that the national examination system had been criticised for using examinations with too many subjects (Ministry of Education, 2006a). Although, since the year 2006, the Ministry of Education has recognized weaknesses in the national examinations, at the time this study was conducted the same system of examinations was still current, with teachers reporting that they were overloaded by the system. In this study some teachers reported being asked to teach subjects that were not their first choice. This point was also recognized by the Secretary-General of the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) who stated that 25000 - 30000 teachers did not consider themselves sufficiently trained to teach in English (Zabidi Hitam, Berita Harian, 20 August 2009). However, the issue of teachers who were not teaching in their field was also found in several other countries. Dee & Cohodes (2008, p. 8) established from the report of the "U.S Department of Education 2004, table B-2, that in the 1999-2000 school year, nearly two-thirds of the middle school teachers whose main assignment was Mathematics did not have a major in their subjects". Similarly in Australia as Darby (2010) noted, the Education and Training Committee in 2006 reported that shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in Mathematics and Science have led to an increase in the number of teachers teaching outside their subject area. The question that arises from this study is why teachers were compelled to teach subjects that were not in their field? Based on records from the Ministry of Education (2006a) there were 27 educational institutions that provided teacher training and produced



teachers in various fields and from 2001 until 2005, the number of prospective teachers who enrolled in these institutions varied between 18,000 to 29,000 per year. In addition, there were seven universities that also offered teacher training (Ministry of Education, 2006a). Despite the number of teacher training institutions and the graduation of many new teachers, the issue of teachers teaching a subject that was not their main area of expertise, still appeared in this study. A different issue reported by teachers in this study who had taught in rural schools was that they faced difficulties in their school environment. In particular, they faced challenges in implementing national education policy when working in a school lacking basic facilities. For example, some teachers claimed that they found it difficult to carry out activities related to the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics in English due to there being insufficient classrooms and inadequate equipment in the science laboratories. It has been reported that this lack of facilities occurs in many other Malaysian schools as well (Ministry of Education, 2006c). Despite the report issued by the Ministry of Education in 2006, according to Sua (2010), secondary schools in urban areas in Malaysia still generally have far superior infrastructural facilities than those in rural areas and, as a result, poor basic facilities have discouraged many teachers from undertaking service in rural areas. The study found that insufficient facilities had led to difficulties for some teachers in implementing national educational policy. Similar findings are reported in a study by Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008, p. 66) in Virginia, USA who claimed that "our results revealed that when learning is taking place in a substandard environment, there tends not to be as clear a focus on academia, and the learning environment is less likely to be perceived as orderly and serious". However, there have not been many studies carried out in Malaysia relating to the effects of a lack of facilities in schools facing challenges implementing new policies.

### **PARENTS PLACING EXCESSIVE DEMANDS ON TEACHERS**

Teachers at both schools considered that parents were too dependent on teachers both to educate and discipline their children. The teachers at Aman School believed that the parents were too busy and had become marginalized in their role of supporting the school in relation to their children's academic progress with the role of disciplinarian falling to the teachers. The teachers at Bersatu School also said that their parents had poor education levels which made it difficult for them to understand the demands of educational policies. Therefore, in the academic area teachers noted that the parents did not take their children's education seriously and relied too much on teachers. The attitude of the parents in believing that the schools have complete responsibility in all areas of education was similar to the views reported by Cheng and Tam (2007). They noted "in many Asian areas like Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Thailand, a tradition of parental participation and community partnership in school education has been largely absent" (p. 255). As a result of these attitudes, it was reported that children had discipline concerns and did not concentrate on their studies. Consequently, the student attitude had influenced the teaching process and indirectly made the introduction of new policies such as the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English more difficult. The teachers hoped that the parents could



control their children's behaviour so that they would be more disciplined; then teachers could perform their duties more efficiently. However, this suggestion is in contrast with a view from Elias (2009, p. 833) who said that "those who say that the schools should focus only on academic skills and that it is up to parents to build students' character may not be technically correct". In this situation, what are the methods that can be used by the schools to involve parents in facilitating the implementation of education policy? The function to educate students is the primary responsibility of a teacher, but if parents devolve responsibility to teachers for developing students discipline without meaningful involvement from them, it is very likely that this will increase the onus on teachers. Yet, if parents are given more opportunity to participate in the school, other issues may arise. As Cheng and Tam (2007) noted "parental involvement in school will inevitably increase the complexity, ambiguities, and uncertainty in the political domain of school. How can schools be well prepared to handle these problems?" (p. 256). They consider that research in parental involvement at schools is still underdeveloped in the context of the Asian tradition.

### **CHALLENGES ARISING FROM THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**

Actions that were taken by the Ministry of Education in order to assist teachers in implementing national educational policies had generated added pressure for teachers. Three issues were raised by the teachers. The first two issues related to the implementation of teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English. Firstly, teachers reported that the teaching aids that were provided by the Ministry of Education were not actually assisting them in their teaching and were a time wasting exercise. Secondly the Buddy System that was developed by the Ministry of Education also did not have a profound impact on the implementation of the policy because English teachers who became the buddies for Science and Mathematics teachers were not familiar with scientific terminology. As a result of these weaknesses some teachers claimed that they had had difficulty in implementing the policy because their English skills were lacking. The third issue is the teachers also faced difficulties due to the Ministry of Education constantly making changes to the policy. Even though teachers did not have detailed information about the changes they were bound to follow the Ministry of Education's instructions. They also stated that, although they faced many difficulties as a result of the implementation of a new policy, and the Ministry of Education knew about the matter, there was no further action taken by them to reduce the problems. This further increased the difficulties for teachers. The circumstances surrounding these problems appear to show that the Ministry of Education was too hasty in the implementation of new policies and did not have adequate planning in place for its implementation. The sequence of the implementation of the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in the English language showed that the execution of this policy was far too rapid. According to Pillay and Thomas(2004) a dramatic shift in the Malaysian Education Policy occurred when on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the Malaysia Ministry of Education announced that from January 2003, Science and Mathematics would be taught in English in Year One (Primary Year One), Form One (Secondary Year One) and



Lower Six (A-Levels Year One) in fully aided government schools. Thus, the period between the announcement and the implementation of the policy was only six months, despite the Malay language being the official language and the medium of instruction in education beginning from primary right up to the tertiary level since the 1970s. Numerous current teachers graduated from an education system that was based on the Malay language. Ambitious policy changes introduced at this pace consequently create enormous hardship. These findings are in line with conditions that were described by Nguyen et al. (2009) who stated that the attitude of policy-makers who want fast results and who feel unable to await the outcome of systematic and lengthy research studies has led to an absence of the healthy scepticism and problematising necessary when introducing any pedagogic initiative. Considering previous researchers' views, and the findings of this study, policy-makers in Malaysia need to consider the need for appropriate and comprehensive planning and preparation prior to any new policy implementation.

### **THE ACTIONS OF THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN IMPOSING ADDITIONAL DUTIES ON TEACHERS**

Two different approaches were adopted by the members of SMTs in the two schools to involve teachers in the implementation of the national educational policies. At Aman School, the members of SMT delivered teachers a list of the various duties and activities that related to its objectives. In contrast, the members of SMTs from Bersatu School gave no instructions, but provided considerable space for teachers to implement a new policy in their own style. Both management styles - delegating tasks or empowering teachers - still provided challenges to both sets of teachers in performing their duties. The question is which approach works better? If the school management emphasise standardising of teachers' activities, it could be, as stated by Hargreaves and Fink (2006), that standardisation has become the enemy of diversity. However, if too much space is given to the teachers this may result in the policy not being fully implemented. The results from a study by Abu Bakar (2007), found that some teachers in Malaysia were reluctant to include computers in their teaching and that this affected the implementation of the Smart School Policy. Therefore, if the school management did not define relevant duties that teachers needed to carry out, would the implementation of policy goals still be achieved? Alternatively, what are the best methods that the members of SMTs can apply to successfully involve teachers in implementing national educational policies without putting them under undue pressure?

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

All the issues discussed above apply in both the schools involved in this study whether the school was in an urban area or in a rural area. In addition to all these challenges, teachers in the rural school faced further issues because of a lack of school facilities. For example, the lack of a laboratory left them unable to perform the policy requirements of teaching science in English. In summary, teachers from both schools had issues in implementing the national educational policy due to five factors which are; the attitudes and abilities of students, school work environment, parents placing excessive demands on teachers, challenges arising from the Ministry

of Education, and the actions of the Senior Management Teams in imposing additional duties on teachers. The next discussion will provide some suggestion that the Ministry of Education could carry out to assist teachers to face those challenges in order to enhance positive implications from the policy implementation that can led to achievement of world-class education. Suggestions for the Ministry of Education include:

- i. The Ministry of Education as a policy maker needs to consider providing ample time for teachers to prepare to implement the policy. It is also suggested that the Ministry of Education should not change policy so frequently.
- ii. It is suggested that the Ministry of Education compromises between centralization and decentralization in implementing policy, considering the differences among schools and not treating all school identically in implementing a policy. That is, the implementation of a policy needs to be adapted to schools' situations.
- iii. At the school level, the Ministry of Education should investigate and evaluate the workload of teachers. The majority of participants whether senior or junior, claimed they were under undue stress because of the scope of their workload. Placing teachers at schools in their hometown could alleviate some stress. In addition, the Ministry of Education needs to also try to improve school facilities, particularly for schools in rural areas.

Therefore all the suggestions need to be pondered in order to assist teachers to face challenges of the implementation of national educational policies. Hopefully with all these efforts could bring education in Malaysia towards achieving world-class education.

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